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AUTHOR Belcher El-Nahhas, Susan M.
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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a general overview of the type of problems encountered in the field of research so that individuals who are contemplating conducting research in an underdeveloped country for the first time are better prepared, and hence, better able to complete their research. The paper recounts a female researcher's personal experiences in conducting field research in education and the social sciences. The research, in Egypt, was undertaken during 1993-1994. The paper advises that the researcher should be familiar with the culture he or she is working in or risk jeopardizing the research itself. It notes that the particular difficulties experienced by the researcher operating in Cairo, Egypt, fall under the following categories: communication; utilities; transportation; pollution; hygiene; disease and sanitation; access to, process of, and secrecy of bureaucracy; personal and national security; informed consent and other ethical considerations; and problems encountered by a lone woman. The paper then discusses the difficulties encountered in each category. (BT)

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by Susan M. Belcher El-Nahhas

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Tips for Novice Researchers: Operational Difficulties Encountered in Underdeveloped Countries

Susan M. Belcher El-Nahhas

There were many operational difficulties which I encountered in conducting dissertation research in Cairo, Egypt. Most of them are, however, not unique to my particular project, but are related to doing research in general in Egypt. Some of these difficulties would be encountered in most underdeveloped countries. The purpose of this paper is to provide a general overview of the type of problems encountered in the field so that individuals who are contemplating conducting research in an underdeveloped country for the first time are better prepared, and hence, better able to complete their research. If novice researchers are not adequately prepared to face these difficulties, their field research may well be in jeopardy.

The particular operational difficulties I experienced conducting research in Cairo, Egypt during 1993-1994 fall under the following categories: communication; utilities; transportation; pollution; hygiene, disease, and sanitation; access to, process of, and secrecy of bureaucracy; personal and national security; informed consent and other ethical considerations; and problems encountered by a lone woman. This last problem may seem trivial, but it may well present one of the biggest obstacles faced. In fact, there are many problems derived from cultural differences which permeate all of these categories. Thus, it is imperative that the researcher be familiar with the culture or risk jeopardizing the research itself.

Woman Solo in Egypt

Restrictions put on lone women and the fears evoked by a woman solo in Egypt have their origin at least five thousand years ago in ancient Egyptian civilization. A woman without a man, particularly if she was unknown and far from home, was greatly feared and ostracized in ancient Egypt (Mertz, 1966:75-76; Robins, 1993:69;139). Male wariness about a woman alone is understandable given the patriarchal context of Egyptian society, which is certainly far more restrictive today for women than it was in ancient Egypt. As in other patriarchal societies, a woman solo, without the company of a male guardian, is public property. Thus, a woman alone is regarded as a prostitute, someone available to every man. There is always the lingering doubt, however, that a woman alone may have a male guardian somewhere else who may return to exact revenge for any perceived "violation of his property" by another man. Thus, the fear and distrust of a woman solo in Egyptian society is even greater if she is an unknown woman. For, a woman alone who is from the local community, known to everyone, there is less fear because everyone will be aware of her status, whether or not she has a male protector. Thus, a local, known woman solo with no male guardian will be targeted more by local men for violent sexual purposes than the unknown woman because she has no protector.

Although it is obvious that Egyptian women do travel without male companions, today as well as five thousand years ago, it is not easy for women to do so. They face social stigma and many obstacles. The price for violating the social norm of having a male protector is high. Punishment meted out to such women varies across a wide spectrum of consequences. Such punishment can be as simple as verbal harassment, being called names and mocked for not having a man, to being sexually assaulted and beaten, raped, and even murdered. These punishments are considered legitimate consequences for the woman who dared to travel alone. The men who perpetrate these crimes are not considered criminals and certainly are not blamed for the attacks nor held responsible for the harm they cause to the woman and/or her family. The woman alone is held solely responsible for the attacks she may experience."...[W]omen [in ancient Egypt] were perceived as honourable when they conformed to the norms of society and dishonourable when they steeped outside them" (Tyldesley, 1994:178).

As is the case today in Egypt, women in ancient Egypt were often viewed as sexually insatiable temptresses who corrupt innocent men; thus, men are warned to stay away from women, particularly married ones, who might lure them away from their families (Tyldesley, 1994:61). Despite such warnings, men commonly pursue lone women, and the men are considered blameless both for their own behavior and for the consequences of that behavior. Again, this is common to most patriarchal societies, but the level of public sexual harassment, the openess of it, is shocking for Westerners because such activity is much more covert in the West.

Being aware of these social norms, I was prepared to challenge them and try to conduct my field research without my husband or any other male guardian. Being the wife of an Egyptian for nearly thirty years, being middle aged with adult children, and being under the "protection" of my husband's extended family, I thought that I could live in my own accommodation and conduct my research solo. I thought that since I was going to be dependent primarily upon my husband's close relatives and my close friends for my research, that the social handicap of being alone would not be too severe for me personally nor for my research. This was, however, not the case. It proved to be a handicap from beginning to end, one which has revealed to me the importance of this norm for all Egyptians today and the consequences one faces if it is ignored. While the personal consequences are greater for Egyptian women than for foreign women, for the foreign researcher, it may mean that the research simply cannot be completed, if even undertaken. Therefore, I have integrated discussion about some of the particular complications faced by a solo woman researcher into the other sections of the paper as relevant.

Probably one of the biggest operational difficulties I faced in Egypt was not being taken seriously as a person. As a woman solo, whose husband and children were in Canada, I was treated with suspicion. This is a custom deeply embedded in the Egyptian subconscious since the early days of ancient Egypt, as previously discussed. It remains a significant part of the collective unconscious in Egypt, and indeed, in many underdeveloped countries.

Egyptian women are not allowed to leave their household, let alone the country, without the explicit permission of their father or husband. Even my husband's relatives and my long-term friends could not understand why I would want to leave my husband for such a long time nor why he would give me permission to do so. Such action is interpreted as being a bad wife and mother, of neglecting my primary duties. This, of course, is because women's gender identity and social roles are to be a wife and mother. Work other than domestic labor is the responsibility of the man, not the woman. While these gender norms are common to all patriarchal societies, physical punishment for their violation is much more overt and public in Egypt and many underdeveloped countries than it is in the West.

Though my first trip to Egypt, early in my marriage, was without my husband, it was for only three months; and as there were concerns about my husband's safety should he return to Egypt at that particular time, I was not ostracized by his extended kin because of his absence. That was decades ago, but this social norm has not changed.

No one could imagine my living alone in my own residence, yet few were willing to visit me there. Both of my sisters-in-law visited me only once in my own residence, and that was after my husband arrived, and they were also accompanied by their husbands and children. Women never live alone in Egypt. I was expected to live in the household of close relatives, not alone; however, this would have greatly jeopardized my research because of restrictions they would have placed on me. Without my husband present, they would have been responsible for my behavior and my behavior would have repercussions for the honor of their family name. Thus, I would not be allowed to receive any male visitors nor to go out without their explicit permission and knowledge of what I would be doing and with whom. This would definitely not include talking to men.

With the resurgence of militant Islamic fundamentalists in Egypt since the mid-1980's, it has been increasingly difficult for Egyptian women to appear in public in Western dress. Fundamentalist notions of "decency" for women includes not only coverage but obscuring even the shape of almost the entire body. Thus, full-length, baggy beltless dresses with high necks and long, loose sleeves and a long, loose scarf covering all the hair are mandatory for pious Muslim women, (*muhagabā t*). Muslim women who violate this dress are scolded, verbally and even sexually harassed, and sometimes beaten in public to "teach them a lesson" by men passersby who see themselves as a sort of morality police force. Even non-Muslim women, including foreigners, are chastised for dressing "indecently". A woman wearing a short-sleeved blouse or having her lower neck exposed would be considered "naked" in Egypt. For these reasons, it is much safer to cover one's body completely with loose fitting clothing when in public. Considering the extremely dusty, dirty environment, wearing a loose cover over one's clothes also serves to keep them clean. By doing this, however, I found that I was harshly rebuked by men and women, but particularly by women, who opposed the fundamentalists and believed that women should not give into such pressure. They were unable to accept my story that my outer cloak was simply my "dustcover", similar to those used to cover automobiles when they were not in use to keep

them clean. It seems that there are no easy answers to such a problem, one that is increasingly common in many underdeveloped countries.

A woman without a live-in male to protect her is by default a "bad" woman, and is generally treated as a prostitute (*sharmūtah*). Thus, I was leered at by neighbors and my *bawāb* (building security guard who lives on the grounds) on a daily basis. The *bawāb* would knock on my door, particularly if I had visitors, to see what I was up to. Many of my friends and relatives preferred to talk to me outside in the street rather than having people see them enter my residence. Those who did visit me, particularly in the evening, found neighbors and *bawabī n* leering and making rude comments as they departed.

When I had any interaction with government officials, I would inevitably be asked where my husband was. When I would explain that he is Egyptian but was currently working in Canada, they would demand to know why my brother-in-law was not accompanying me. When I wanted to obtain access to various libraries and offices and/or to speak to certain officials, I would try to get a male friend or relative to accompany me, ostensibly as my husband. There are a few Egyptian male friends to whom I am indebted for providing such services without harassing me themselves. Sometimes this strategy of having a "borrowed husband" worked, but often it did not because one's word is not enough. In Egypt, you have to produce your passport and other documentation, including a marriage license, if asked, and they usually ask!

Whether I had a man accompanying me or not, I was greeted with suspicion. If I had a male companion when I went out to interview respondents, he might be given a jaundiced eye by others, wondering if he was having an affair with me behind my husband's back. This was true whether the man was known to them or not. Some men became emboldened seeing me with a man and so would make advances to me later.

When I stopped by to speak male friends at their offices, secretaries and others there would stare at me as if I was disgusting. Sometimes security guards would try to lean against me on my way into the office and/or ask me for money. Some of the wives of some of my husband's colleagues and friends would become extremely jealous of me visiting their husbands at work and/or getting rides with them. This became such a serious problem that I was unable to interview some of these women and it even caused some major fights between these husbands and wives.

Some of the men who did help me out from time to time by accompanying me assumed that I would also date them and become sexually involved with them. Although these men were married, highly educated, and had studied and/or worked abroad for extended periods, some of them played "cat and mouse" with me despite my continued insistence that I was not interested and not amused. As in most patriarchal societies, men do not take "No" as an answer from a woman, and they believe that they must force themselves

on the woman because she enjoys such behavior. Unfortunately, a woman is still a walking vagina in Cairo and if you do not have an owner, then you are every man's woman.

Perhaps the most frustrating obstacle I faced, and one which I had greatly underestimated prior to starting the field research in Egypt is the resistance I met from friends and relatives to conducting the interviews without my husband's presence. Virtually no one took me or my work seriously without my husband present. Usually the first response I got when trying to schedule an interviewed was, "Why don't we wait until your husband arrives? Let me know when he comes and we can set a time."

I would calmly explain that the reason I was spending nearly a year in Egypt is because I it would take that long to do my research and that I had to complete all the interviews before returning to Canada. Since I had obtained no outside funding for the research, I was doing this study at great financial cost to myself. Furthermore, if I did not complete what I had set out to do, I would not be able to complete my doctorate, so much more time and money would also be lost. I explained that my husband would be arriving at the end of my research period so that we could spend one month in Egypt on holiday visiting relatives and friends without being caught up in trying to complete the research.

Usually my explanation would fall on deaf ears. Sometimes I was reduced to tears because I felt so helpless and trapped. I felt like a child unable to get its parents' attention, lost and alone. Most of the women could not understand why I would engage in such a project without my husband, and even why I would want to engage in such a project in the first place. They had no understanding of the research requirements for a Ph.D. in education and the social sciences. My husband had written many letters to these individuals, both before my arrival in Egypt and during my stay there, to explain my project and to ask for their cooperation and support. This failed to be sufficient. Only after my husband actually arrived in Egypt did people take me seriously. When my husband asked them to cooperate in person, they were only too glad to do so.

Communications

The first difficulty I encountered with my research was during the preparatory work carried out in Canada before arriving in Egypt. Two years before I started my field work, I wrote letters to many people whom I have known for a long time, informing them of my intended research project and soliciting information which might be of help. Although some individuals did reply with suggestions and feedback as well as providing names of others who may be of assistance, most did not reply. This is not unusual for a variety of reasons, including the fact that much of the mail sent to Egypt is never delivered to the addressee, Egyptians are not accustomed to answering letters, mail sent from Egypt often never leaves the country, and Egyptians would not believe that you are actually carrying out the research until you present them with some evidence in person that the project is actually being undertaken. Thus, soliciting information at a distance is almost impossible. However, I believe that these other reasons were significantly reinforced by the fact that the people

contacted knew that I would be conducting the research in Egypt without my husband, who would remain in Canada. Hence, it would not be considered decent for them to reply to my inquiry.

This lack of response from most of the people I contacted necessitated my telephoning numerous persons to obtain the necessary information, a process which proved time-consuming and expensive. In the end, I had received some good information and made some new contacts, most of whom were extremely helpful, both before I arrived in Egypt to do the field work and after. I am very grateful for this assistance. The problem was, however, that the most crucial piece of information for my research was not provided, forcing me to rethink the entire basis of my project once I arrived in Egypt. Thus, obtaining timely, relevant and accurate information is extremely difficult, especially at a distance.

Another communication problem encountered was the telephone system. The technical aspects of this will be discussed below, but Egyptians have been so conditioned to the telephones working only sporadically that they do not rely upon them to communicate with others. Many Egyptians use the telephone only for dire emergencies, and most feel uncomfortable speaking for more than a few minutes on the telephone. Furthermore, there are almost no public telephones. The ones which do exist are located inside train stations, usually only one very old one per station, and there are long line ups to use them. The private sector provides telephone and fax services, local and long distance, usually located inside five star hotel lobbies; however, these services are extremely expensive, usually ten or twenty times local rates and double or triple government rates for long distance. Government telephone offices in various neighborhoods provide long distance service for reasonable rates but the lines are old and unreliable and the line ups are long. In order to make long distance calls from one's home telephone, one has to pay a fee of several hundred US dollars to apply for the service. Thus, this service is available to very few people.

Utilities

Over the last twenty years, the entire infrastructure of the city has been subject to modernization. This means that the water, sewer, electric, and telephone lines are being replaced as well as natural gas lines laid throughout Cairo, involving several governments and contractors. Roads were dug up all over the city, often completely blocking off entire neighborhoods to vehicular traffic for months on end. The transporation nighmare this produced will be discussed below.

Thus, utilities are constantly being broken or blacked out. Power outages and overworked telephone exchanges present serious obstacles to doing efficient research. Many of the telephone exchanges still have antique switching equipment and old lines and telephone numbers with only five or six digits; it is almost impossible to complete a telephone call on these lines between 9 AM and midnight. Some telephone exchanges have been modernized with the most up-to-date fiberoptic underground cables, modern switching equipment and seven digit telephone numbers. These new exchanges and lines are much

more reliable and usually work properly all the time. The only difficulty may be that many Egyptian institutions have a switchboard which operates between 9:30 or 10 AM and 12:30 or 1 PM. It is, thus, impossible to call in or out at other times. This was the case at many of the public institutions where I frequently had to contact people by telephone.

Electrical power supply problems are not only frustrating but dangerous for researchers using computers. The supply of electricity is unstable, and power surges as well as power failures are a regular, though unpredictable, occurrance. Having a power stablizer with surge protection for your computer is a must, even if your computer is wired for dual voltage. This would be true for any other electrical applicances used. This makes it somewhat difficult to use a laptop computer because it is not practical to carry the power stabilizer around with you. I always carried an extra battery for my laptop computer and found that on most days in the field, both batteries would be dead before my work was completed. Given the time consuming nature of transportation in Cairo, it was not practical to return home to recharge batteries. Often, I reluctantly had to trudge around with my power stabilizer in order to maximize my time efficiency.

Frequent and lengthy periods with no water supply is also frustrating. In fact, many parts of Cairo and most residents living above the second floor have no water at all during the day time because of low water pressure and/or breaks in water lines, forcing residents to fill up containers and even bathtubs with water during the night for use in the daytime. People are able to store barely enough water for cooking and drinking during the day time, so they are generally not willing to lend water to a neighbor.

Another difficulty regarding water use is that the water lines are full of fine gravel and sand, plugging up taps, and the water is contaminated because of the leaks in both water and sewer lines. Thus, is is best to boil water before drinking it. The water is heavily chlorinated, so it is also a good idea to charcoal filter the water to remove some of the chlorine. Despite these precautions, it is common to have stomach upsets. Having diarrhea from the water makes lengthy periods conducting research outside of the household difficult.

Transportation

Another difficulty which everyone confronts in Cairo is that of transportation. It is actually faster to walk in most parts of the city than to be in a vehicle. Traffic jams are constant; vehicles do not remain on their own side of the street; vehicles drive over as well as park on sidewalks; and drivers blast their horns almost continuously. Thus, it is noisy, slow, and dangerous to drive or take a taxi, micro-bus (van), or mini-bus, and much worse to take a city bus.

Taxi drivers are supposed to use meters, but always charge much more than they should. They can be very volatile and even Egyptians are often afraid to argue with them in case they become violent. It is also becoming more dangerous for a lone woman to take a taxi as some have been robbed by taxi drivers and there are more frequent cases of women

being raped by taxi drivers as well. Unfortunately, both rape and murder are becoming more common because of the pressure of abject poverty. The structural adjustment program imposed by the International Monetary Fund on Egypt has resulted in a significant drop in the standard of living and seriously jeopardizing the ability of the average Egyptian to afford an adequate diet. As a result, women alone, whether Egyptian or foreign, try to minimize their travel, be very polite to male drivers, and pay generously for it to minimize the chances of being harmed. Taxi drivers who were not interested in sexually harassing women preferred to pick up rich Arab men from the Gulf countries because they pay the highest tips. Thus, sometimes it is very difficult to get a taxi.

There are several sizes and types of buses and vans providing public transportation as well as a new, modern commuter train. The buses and trains are government owned and run, but the vans are privately owned and run but publically licensed and regulated. Sexual harassment is rampant for all women, not only in the streets and taxis, but also on the buses, vans, and trains. Because of the extremely crowded conditions, it is difficult for a woman to prevent men from groping her and impossible to push him away. A man travelling on a bus or train with a woman usually tries to envelope his body around the woman to use it as a barrier to others so they cannot grope her. Because most of these forms of public transportation are so crowded and the majority of patrons are very poor, it is no longer very safe for a middle class Egyptian and certainly not for a foreign woman to use them. I experienced a fair amount of hostility as a foreigner using public transportation.

I preferred to take the train because it was very fast and it was somewhat easier to protect myself from harassment. The front car of the train is reserved for women and young children. The trains have many cars, usually more than twenty, so the one woman's car was usually very crowded and often impossible to enter. Even though it was crowded, it was a relief not to be harassed by men. Nevertheless, men would constantly try to get into the women's car and harass as many women as they could before being caught by a conductor and expelled. Sometimes the women in the car would shout at the man, cursing and berating him, beating at him, and shooing him off the train.

Lining up to buy train tickets in the train station, however, also presented some problems. Since the line up is usually very long and people are constantly jumping the queue, I preferred to buy large numbers of tickets at once, much to the chagrin of the employees. But at least that way, I had my train ticket and could bypass the line up for up to a month at a time. Another problem related to lining up to buy train tickets is that there are two line ups at each wicket window, one for men and one for women. The men's line up would usually be extremely long and there would often be few, if any, women in the woman's line. I noticed that if a man had a woman with him, he would send the woman to buy the tickets because it was quicker. However, because I felt it was not fair to jump the line up just because I was a woman, I lined up with the men. This created a lot of problems. Sometimes I stood my ground and explained that I would wait my turn, but sometimes some men would get so irate that they would threaten me and/or begin to push me out of the line up.

Sometimes the threats would go far beyond my violating the line up code, telling me to go back to my country or cursing me in general. Then, I would usually comply and go to the front of the line to buy my tickets. Able-bodied young women without children or packages who would go directly to the window to buy their train tickets, bypassing fifty men, would usually not respond to my telling them that this is unfair. Sometimes the women would call me names for being in the men's line up.

Hygiene, Disease, and Sanitation

Inadequate sanitation infrastructure, particularly toilets, was another major problem. There is almost no such thing as a public toilet in Egypt. Egyptian government offices, universities, and most non-governmental organizations which I visited had appalling toilet facilities. Usually the sewers were backed up, water pipes along the walls were rusty and either broken or leaking, and the floors were flooded with sewage. Usually there were no doors, no privacy, and never any toilet paper. Most of them were unisex and a woman attendant charged what she could in order to earn a living. Indeed, if there was a toilet to sit on, it was often cracked, unstable, and generally perilous to sit on. Usually, there was no toilet, just a hole in the floor.

Thus, my need to use a toilet on a regular basis shaped my planning the day's route through the city. Because the toilet facilities in the five star hotels are the same as in Canada and the U.S.A., I used them and other hotel facilities, such as telephones and banks, frequently. I generally had to pass by these clean, air conditioned hotels, and they became a temporary oasis for me. There was usually tight security checks entering the grounds of these hotels because they were targets for disgruntled Islamic fundamentalists, but the tighter the security, the safer I felt. Although I never experienced any harassment or negative reactions by hotel security guards, all of whom spoke some English and many of whom were relatively well educated, I did experience some harassment by male hotel guests in the lobby and restaurants as well as from male workers inside the hotels because I was solo. Men working at the front desk, bell hops, men working in the banks and shops within the hotel, and even some of the waiters in the restaurants often leered at me and treated me as a prostitute, albeit a high priced call girl. If I sat for more than fifteen minutes in the hotel lobby, I would be asked to move. Although I frequently bought newspapers and post cards, exchanged money, made telephone calls, bought meals, and conducted other such legitimate activities within these hotels on a regular basis such that the staff came to recognize me as a regular customer, because I was almost always alone, I was regarded with distrust and lack of respect by many of these men.

In addition to the health hazards posed by drinking unboiled water, there are a number of endemic infectious diseases in Egypt, like most underdeveloped countries, which one must be aware of. Tuberculosis, brucellosis, trachoma, bilharzia/schistosomiasis, dengue, leptospirosis, leishmaniasis, penicillin-resistant Neisseria gonorrhoeae, all types of hepatitis, syphillis, and HIV are all found throughout Egypt and malaria is found in some regions and is more prominent in the winter than the summer. Preventative measures, including

innoculation where possible, good hygiene, and being careful where and what one eats are imperative if illness is to be avoided. All fruit should be bought in tact, washed and peeled before eaten. Melons should be avoided since dirty water is often injected to increase their weight and price. Salad should be avoided or disinfected with Dettol. Vegetables and meat should be well cooked. Cheap restaurants and street food vendors should be avoided. Public juice stands should also be avoided because the glasses and equipment used to crush the fruit are dirty. Most Egyptians have very poor hygiene and this must be considered when eating outside one's own residence.

Bureaucracy and Security

Another major obstacle to doing research in Egypt is that I did not get clear information as to what is required in terms of type of visa and government permission to conduct the research. Knowing that the government has a very complicated set of regulations and procedures, I tried conscientiously to obtain the correct papers; however, everyone whom I asked gave me a different answer, ranging from "such research is not allowed at all" to "forget government papers and just do the research". Over the course of several months, I wasted a lot of time speaking with government officials, senior university administrators and professors, personnel at the Canadian, British, and American Embassies, and people at non-governmental organizations. In the end, I did not get any special visa or documentation related to conducting research. This did, however, prove to be problematic when I tried to enter certain governmnent as well as non-governmental offices. Armed guards and even high-ranking officials would demand government stamps in my passport which I did not have, and so would refuse my requests for information and/or entry.

Another problem encountered is that entry to any Egyptian government building or office is not allowed without a special permit or special permission, which is often very difficult to get. The irony, however, is that if you know a senior person within such an office, you can often enter with that person, unchallenged. Sometimes, however, even if you are with a very senior person, the armed guards will not allow entrance without written authorization. Thus, I was able to freely enter some government offices and ministries because someone who was high ranking inside told the guards to allow me access, some offices I only had access to when I was actually accompanied by a senior official, and I had no access to other offices no matter how hard senior personnel argued with the armed guards.

Obtaining written data and documentation is extremely difficult to do in Egypt. Even though data may exist, I was often told that it did not exist. Government officials believe that every piece of information and every document is top secret, and so will not release anything. If one is fortunate to obtain some information, it is usually devoid of referencing or the referencing is ambiguous so as to be useless. Most of the written information I received from government sources was also not dated. Nevertheless, I am particularly grateful to a high-ranking woman in the government who gave me some books otherwise not available.

Taking photographs is prohibited in many places throughout Cairo and the countryside. Egyptian authorities will cite military installations and security reasons for this. Often, however, there is no good reason for this restriction. This made it very difficult for me to freely take photographs of billboards for use in my study. At times, I resorted to driving with a friend who would distract police and other officials who might have stopped me from taking the photographs. Sometimes I was forced to take the photographs from inside a vehicle to avoid being caught. This, along with the difficulty of transportation, meant that it took a full three months before I was satisfied that I had found and photographed all the billboard images of women in the Cairo area, a necessary prerequisite for my interviewing of respondents.

Cameras are forbidden inside most government buildings and Western embassies. This makes it very difficult if you are out for the day and you have your camera with you. It would not be safe to leave the camera with the guards and so I learned to hide the camera before approaching such places. Though my bags were searched a number of times at various government buildings and embassies, my camera was never discovered and I avoided major hassles. Many others were not so fortunate and loss of film is a common occurance, as is loss of the camera itself. Video cameras are even more suspect, though because of the paranoia about cameras and because of the heat and dust it is very impractical to carry a video camera around. In fact, I never saw anyone with a video camera in Cairo, except for at tourist sites like the Pyramids. I did have my undeveloped film confiscated once, despite the immediate intervention of a high ranking official; the best he could do was guarantee that I would get the film back developed if I paid the appropriate fee. I did, though the fee was exhorbitant and the quality of the developing was terrible.

Access to the universities in Cairo was equally difficult. I was able to convince officials at the American University in Cairo to sell me a one year membership as a visiting student/scholar which enabled me to obtain an identification card with which I could gain entrance through any of the university gates to the buildings and grounds as well as entrance to and borrowing privileges from the library. My work was greatly facilitated by this, as well as the fact that a good friend of mine was working as a departmental chair that year and he was able to provide me with access to an office and e mail. He introduced me to many academic and non-academic staff at the university as well as students. Without documentation from one's home university and some luck, an outsider would not be able to obtain the privilege card. Without this card, access is very difficult and usually means having to have an appointment with someone inside the university and leaving one's passport with the guards, a practice not recommended.

Entrance to Cairo University was more complicated than that at the American University because separate permission must be granted to enter at each university gate, and each university gate provides access to only one or at most a few buildings. The campus is not open such that one can walk throughout the entire grounds; rather, it is cut up into compounds surrounded by high fences with entrance to each only possible from the street.

Early in my field work, I was able to obtain free entrance to two gates thanks to friends who are professors in a particular faculty. Later, entrance was gained to another gate. Finally, about mid-way through my field work, a dean of one of the faculties was kind enough to write a letter authorizing my entrance to any of the gates at Cairo University. Though I had to produce this letter every time I wanted to get into most of the university gates, I am very grateful to this individual as it saved me a lot of hassles.

I am also grateful to an employee at AMIDEAST for trying very hard to provide me with documentation verifying the accreditation of the University of Alberta. Despite a letter from my supervisor, who at the time was an associate dean in one the faculties at the University of Alberta, indicating that the U. of A. was a state university accredited by the province of Alberta and a member of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, in the end I was unable to satisfy the Egyptian authorities of the legitimacy of the University of Alberta because they only recognized universities listed in indexes at AMIDEAST as accredited. Since Canadian universities are not listed in these American indexes, this organization could not provide me with the proper documentation to identify myself as a legitimate student conducting research in Egypt. This documentation was necessary obtain the U.S. Embassy form and stamp required by the Egyptian government to apply for permission to actually do the research. The Egyptian government depends on the U.S. to do this and does not accept documentation from any other embassy. I spent many hours with this person trying to figure out how to get out of this "Catch-22", and never did. While I was lucky in being able to conduct my research without this formality, it may present a more serious obtstacle to most people in this predicament.

Even entrance to embassies is difficult in Egypt. Being a Westerner with a Western passport is not sufficient for entrance to most Western embassies. One has to have a valid passport of the country to whose embassy one wishes to gain access. One also has to have an appointment with a particular person or office within the embassy or entrance is denied for security reasons. Most Western embassies have reading rooms and libraries, which I had hoped to use. This, however, proved to be very difficult to actually do.

The streets are full of armed police and even army personnel. They work in groups, often directing traffic, guarding buildings and intersections, and patrolling streets. They carry rifles and lots of ammunition. Flatbed trucks with up to forty armed policemen are frequently seen parked alongside roads, readt to be mobilized for action. Often large numbers of armed police and their trucks sit across streets, prohibiting access to certain areas for various security reasons. Sometimes pedestrian access as well as vehicular access is denied. Whenever one is confronted by a policeman, he will demand that you produce a passport. It is forbidden to not have your passport on your person at all times in Egypt if you are not a resident. Residents must carry their state photo identification card and produce them on demand by the police or army. If the official inspecting your identification is not satisfied, he will force you to go to the police station with him. This is never a pleasant situation. There is always a very long wait, with several bureaucratic procedures. As police officers all

speak English in Egypt, fortunately, language is usually not a problem; however, for a woman alone, it is a serious problem to be stopped by the police. The police officer will usually demand that a "responsible man" come down to speak for you. They generally refuse to deal directly with a woman, even a foreign woman, who is alone. It is impossible to forget that Egypt is a police state when you walk along the streets.

Ethics

This, in fact, led to another major obstacle experienced in conducting this research, the fact that most of the women really had no comprehension of what I was trying to do nor of why I was doing it. This made it difficult to get informed consent and led to some concerns about ethical considerations. Here we can see a number of previously discussed operational difficulties acting together -- problems of communication, transportation, access, bureaucracy and security, and being a woman alone.

Egyptians were baffled about qualitative research, whether they were uneducated or highly educated. Participant observation and open-ended interviews in which respondents' personal opinions were expressed did not constitute "scientific" research in their minds. The educated were so influenced by quantitative methodologies and positivism that they were literally unaware of other paradigms of research and knowledge. Educated and uneducated alike were unable to understand why I was doing this research and why Canadians would care about the information obtained.

This would introduce other problems in trying to get the respondents to give their own personal opinion about images of women on billboards. Inevitably, I would be asked, "Is this a test?" and/or "What's the correct answer?" They did not want to get a "low score" on the "test"! When I tried to assure them that the whole point was to get their true opinions, they would wonder why and "who cares?" Some would ask me outright if I was collecting information for some Egyptian-based project because they really could not understand Canadians being interested in it. In the end, very few of the respondents had a good understanding of the nature and purpose of the research I was doing.

The Interview Settings

Conducting the interview at my residence when the respondent was alone proved to be the best option because there were usually no interruptions and the woman was more relaxed if it was only the two of us in the residence. However, due to the problems referred to above regarding the inappropriateness of a woman living alone in Egypt as well as the severe transportation and communication problems, it was extremely difficult to conduct the interviews in my residence.

There are a number of difficulties encountered conducting an interview in the workplace. One is the impossibility of guaranteeing when the interview will begin as well as predicting what interruptions will occur due to problems arising in the workplace. Another problem is that there is virtually no privacy in the workplace, making it very difficult to

conduct an interview. Most participants did not have their own office space. Even those high-ranking bureaucrats who did have their own office would have security guards and/or low level workers in the same office space who were always available to run errands. A third problem posed by trying to interview respondents in the workplace is that many workplaces are virtually inaccessible to non-employees. In many cases, although I had made special arrangements to enter the grounds for a scheduled interview, it was impossible for me to get in the front door

Methodological Problems

There were a number of problems encountered related to the research methodology used. Some are inherent in the use of participant observation; inductive, generative, and subjective processes of lengthy, open-ended interviews; and hermeneutic and dialectic interaction with participants. These are problems any researcher would encounter using these research methodologies in any setting and so will not be discussed here.

Some of the problems, however, were related to the nature of the research topic, Egyptian cultural expectations, and the reality of everyday life in Egypt. Given the nature of the data collection undertaken in Egypt, the operational difficulties discussed previously presented major obstacles and required some modification of the original plan.

In addition, there were problems related to the lengthiness of the interviews; the interview settings; class hostility; hostility towards Westerners and the need for rapport with the participants; and fears about confidentiality and security. Because these problems arose from Egyptian culture and are also likely to be faced in most underdeveloped countries, they will be addressed briefly here. Other problems which have to be overcome in qualitative research in underdeveloped countries includes researcher bias, including influences of participants' on the researcher and influences of the researcher on the participants; reliability; interpretation and translation; reconciling contradictory accounts; and replicability. This last cluster of problems, however, are inherent in qualitative research regardless of location, and so will not be addressed in this paper.

Class Hostility

A serious problem in conducting qualitative research in Egypt is the hostility that exists amongst the social classes. This is difficult enough in doing general research and participant observation, but it becomes critical when actually interviewing respondents. The wealthy treat the lower and lower middle class with great hostility, paternalism, and domination. It reminds me of the way rich whites treated blacks in the U.S. South during the first half of this century; the relationship is one of overt exploitation. The poor are objectified, dehumanized, controlled, and considered somewhat "subhuman". The privileged classes are arrogant and hostile towards those in lower classes.

As an Egyptian friend lamented on a recent trip to Egypt, it is virtually impossible to be a "nice" person there because everyone is so used to expending tremendous energy

fighting against imposition by others that if you do not fight back, you get "run over". Respect is won by standing one's ground and/or by dominating others. If you give the other person some "space" and some respect, you are at the same time humiliating yourself and asking to be "controlled". This is true for individuals who are relatively equal in social status and power, but even more so if s/he is your subordinate. Thus, in such a steeply hierarchical system, social position determines status, roles, and power.

Since it is very difficult for me to be arrogant with poor people, Egyptians are somewhat suspicious about my "softness"; however, as a foreigner and a Western Christian, Egyptians do not expect me to adhere to Egyptian cultural ways. I have been affectionately referred to as *magnū nah* (crazy, insane) and an *'afrī tah* (ghost, monster) by those who know me. In this sense, I have more freedom than a well-educated and/or rich Egyptian woman in communicating with poor women. It does, however, make me vulnerable to abuse by men, particularly those from lower social status.

Hostility to Westerners and Need for Rapport with Participants

In addition, rapport with participants, regardless of their status and class, is necessary for qualitative research. Discussing personal opinions and issues is much more sensitive in underdeveloped countries than in the West. People are not open, even with close kin, and are wary of what use would be made of such information. My research centered on how women conceptualized gender and national identity and I interviewed women I have known for about twenty years. It was necessary to interview people I know well because I already knew much about their personal lives and so could determine the reliability of their interviews and because it would have been difficult to get women I did not know to address such a sensitive subject. Egyptian women inevitably think that they and their society are being unfavorably compared to the West when they are asked about gender. This is also the case in many other underdeveloped countries. Thus, it is imperative that the researcher have good rapport with the respondents, preferably know them well before starting the research, and be sensitive to their defensiveness vis-à-vis the West about their culture.

Even though it was difficult for most of the respondents to imagine why I was being self-critical and self-reflexive about gender because they think that all Canadians are rich and that gender is more easily realized in Canada, I shared some of my own past with them to let them know that I do not come from a rich family and that I have had many struggles in my life. I explained that there are many social problems in Canada related to gender and that it is a societal problem as well as a problem for individuals. I also indicated that I am dissatisfied with many aspects of life in Canada and that I am lucky that my job enables me to discuss many serious social issues with my students as part of their university education. This sharing of information about my society relieved some of the participants' distrust and fear that I want to impose my "superior", Western values on them once they realized that I actively question much in my own culture. It is imperative to establish common links as women between researcher and participants.

I assured the participants, particularly the domestic servants and other poor women, that their ideas and feelings which they shared with me would not be revealed to anyone and that I would keep the information confidential. This was important in order to secure good rapport with these women. The poor felt particularly vulnerable because it would be the norm for their employers to control what they said to me, either by speaking for them and/or being present at the interview or obtaining the information from the researcher later and disciplining them for disobeying. It was imperative to keep confidentiality and to assure the respondents about this. They were told that the information may be used in the dissertation but that it would be presented anonymously and in such a way as to protect their identities.

Fears about Confidentiality and Security

As I anticipated, most of the participants were somewhat dubious about my assurances of confidentiality. This is because Egyptians are used to being surveyed and monitored by the government and/or government-backed agencies; and this, combined with the fact that Egyptians have a long history of being exploited by the government means that they distrust people who ask questions, particularly personal ones, and are suspicious of what uses the information will be put. I have somewhat of an advantage over other researchers in that I know my respondents and have discussed similar topics in the past with them, so that while they did not really understand what a Ph.D. dissertation is or why I have to have this information for a research project, they were not as reticent as strangers would be to answer my questions fully and truthfully. Furthermore, I already knew much about the personal lives and views of most of the respondents because of the long association I have had with them. Researchers who do not know their participants will not get reliable information in general, but especially if the information is of a personal nature. This is a reality not generally discussed in graduate research methodology courses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a wide range of operational difficulties researchers face in the field in underdeveloped countries, particularly if they are conducting qualitative research. These problems can be categorized as either physical infrastructure or cultural. It is imperative that novice researchers and even experienced researchers who have not conducted research in underdeveloped countries be aware of these difficulties before commencing research in the field. Otherwise, their work may well be in jeopardy. This paper summarizes some of the difficulties I faced in Egypt and which are typically found in most underdeveloped countries. The onus is on the prospective researcher to become aware of these problems. Unfortunately, they are far too commonly never mentioned in graduate research methodology courses.

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